

Wheelchairs & Railroads

Written by Tu Xin-yi
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Two days a week, uniformed Tzu Chi volunteers gather at the Zhanghua railroad station. On Fridays, they assist handicapped schoolchildren off their school bus and wheel them aboard their trains to go home; on Sundays, the volunteers do the reverse, helping those same children transfer from the trains back to the school bus for the trip back to their dorms.

Hong Lan-yi and many of his classmates take the train twice a week on their weekend commutes between their homes and their school dormitory. But their commute is no ordinary affair. In fact, they require a lot of help on both ends of their journey. Why do these high school students need help with something as simple as taking a train to and from school?

Lan-yi and his schoolmates attend National Hemei Experimental School in Zhanghua, central Taiwan, a school for children who have difficulties with physical mobility. In 2009, the school boasted an enrollment of 744 children, ranging in age from kindergarten through high school. The students come from all over Taiwan, and most of them live too far from the school to commute daily. Those students live on campus from Sunday night to Friday afternoon, then travel home on the weekends to be with their families.

During the school year, about 70 of these students show up at the Zhanghua railroad station each Friday afternoon to catch their homeward-bound trains; on Sunday afternoon, they take the trains back to school in Zhanghua. Getting so many able-bodied children on and off the trains safely and quickly would be hard enough, but the challenge is greatly increased because these children have limited mobility. About half of the 70 students are confined to wheelchairs, and those that are not move with some difficulty. It is no surprise that the special needs of these students put a strain on the station employees that must assist them.

The children are further hampered at the train station by a lack of elevator access to any of its three platforms. In fact, there is not a single elevator in the entire station. To get from one platform to another, children in wheelchairs must cross the tracks, a particularly horrifying experience. What could the children do if their small wheels got stuck in the middle of the tracks? They could neither walk out of harm's way nor reach the emergency button to halt oncoming trains.

On Friday afternoons, a specially-equipped school bus takes the students to the train station. After arriving, a motley crew of teachers, school volunteers, and train station staffers scurry to get the students and their wheelchairs off the bus. Then they push the wheelchairs on a convoluted and circuitous route to the spots on the platform where train cars with on-board wheelchair parking spaces stop. There the students and their helpers wait for the right train to arrive.

Because of the limited wheelchair parking on board, a train can take but a few wheelchair passengers at a time. This means that the students must stagger their departures over several

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trains. All in all, it is a big undertaking. Getting the handicapped students, wheelchair-bound or not, off the bus, across the rail tracks, and secured on the trains is a big job—made twice as big because the reverse must be completed when the students return to school on Sunday.



The guardians

The task of helping the children get to and from school each weekend became so difficult that in 2004, Xie Mu-xiu, a teacher at the school who was also a Tzu Chi volunteer, sought help from the Tzu Chi Zhanghua branch. In May 2004 the branch enthusiastically took over the responsibility of helping the children.

"We used to dread the coming of Fridays and Sundays because of the students," said Li Qing-jin, the station master at the Zhanghua station. "But that fear dissipated six years ago, when the Tzu Chi volunteers came to help. We could finally sleep easier on the nights before the big days."

Twenty Tzu Chi volunteers show up at the rail station every Friday afternoon at around four, an hour before the arrival of the school bus, to get ready for the big rush.

Once the school bus has pulled up at the station, the volunteers split into two groups. One group helps students off the front of the bus; the other group helps students exit through the rear. The rear of the bus is equipped with a wheelchair elevator. Students without wheelchairs take the front exit.

The volunteers have worked with the students long enough to know them well. They greet the students by name and chat with them warmly. "The students tend to be shy in front of strangers," school counselor Zuo Yan-lin said. "But they are quite at ease with the volunteers. Over the last six years, the volunteers have won the students over."

The volunteers usually work about two hours from the time the school bus arrives to when the last student departs on the train. A volunteer could easily spend four or five hours for each shift of this work: the travel time from home to the train station, one hour of preparation at the station before the students' arrival, two hours helping students onto the trains, some time to tie up loose ends after all students are gone, and finally the travel time to go home.

On Sundays, another group of 20 volunteers gathers at the station in the afternoon to help the returning students get off the trains, escort them out of the station, and put them on the school bus. The pace of the Sunday routine is slightly less hectic because the only time-sensitive task is to get the students off the train. If they take a little longer to reach the school bus, it doesn't matter. The bus, unlike the trains, will wait for them.

The Friday crew does not have this luxury because the homeward bound trains run on a schedule and will not wait if the students are late or not ready to board the trains. The

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volunteers therefore are under pressure to deliver the students to the appropriate platforms to wait for their trains. Despite the time pressure, the volunteers cannot and will not hurry the children along at the expense of safety.



Motherly and fatherly

The volunteers not only help the students on and off the trains—they also pay close attention to their emotional well-being. They know the students have a strong sense of pride despite their limited mobility. "They normally would not accept help unless they absolutely need to," said volunteer Zhong Xue-fang. "That's why we ask them if they need help. If they decline, we respect their wishes. In that case, we just step back a little so that they can still easily reach us if they want to."

Sometimes behind the pride hides something a student wants to keep private. One of the students has two brothers, and all three use wheelchairs. Their mother works odd jobs and receives government assistance to support the family. "I cried when he told me his family situation," said volunteer Zhang Wen-cheng. He likes to make the three of them laugh while working with them at the train station. He said, "Seeing them smile makes me feel warm."

The volunteers treat the children like their own. One day a cold front hit. While the students and volunteers waited for the trains to come, strong winds penetrated and chilled everyone on the platforms. Some of the students started shivering and sniffing. Out of love, the volunteers took off their own heavy jackets and put them on the children even though they were shivering themselves.

Strangled by his umbilical cord at birth, student Hong Lan-yi has a severe case of cerebral palsy that limits his motor capacity. He is also almost blind. His mother, Huang Wei-cong, accompanied him in his classroom every day until he graduated from elementary school. Then she started to homeschool him, but she found that to be less than satisfactory. Lacking sufficient external stimuli and interaction with fellow students, Lan-yi's oral skills began to decline. "He regressed a lot in just one year," Wei-cong said.

Wei-cong decided to send him to the Hemei school. "For a whole year nobody at the school knew that he could talk," She remembered. "Gradually, with his teachers' encouragement and with stimuli from his classmates, Lan-yi finally began to speak again."

Though Wei-cong encourages Lan-yi to mingle with people, she is rather careful when it comes to entrusting her son to the care of others. She has had some bad experiences.

Once she put him in a camp for children with cerebral palsy. "The staff there put his diapers on backwards, and sat him in his wheelchair in a wrong posture. I took him to the doctor afterwards, and the doctor said that his hip joint was badly dislocated, a telltale sign that the camp staffers had improperly helped him into or out of his wheelchair."

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